

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Djam Vivie was born in 1953 in the village of Peki-Avetile, Volta Region, Ghana. He is a member of the Ewe tribe whose homeland spans sections of Ghana, Benin and Togo. Drumming is a central part of Ewe traditional culture and, together with dance and music, is used in many social situations.

“In Peki, we use drums to communicate with spirits and to one another, village to village. We use drums when we have a newborn baby. You call all the families together and they welcome this new baby. And then you have to

name the baby...we use drums to celebrate that moment. We also use drums to celebrate the full moon. And at death, when someone is moving from the material world to the spirit world, to tell them goodbye.”

Djam learned woodworking skills as a boy. “Somebody in the village needs to know how to make the drums. They learn how to build a drum from a master taking an apprentice. My grandfathers on my mother’s and father’s sides were both craftsmen who built traditional furniture and drums for the village. I learned from watching them. They gave me the inspiration. By watching them, I developed my own style. Through practice, I used my imagination to solve the problems that came up in a project.”

Like earlier generations of wood carvers in his family, Djam makes a variety of items: chief stools, chairs, masks, spoons, figures and drums. Most of his work is done with hand tools but since moving to Wisconsin he has adopted the chainsaw for hallowing logs for drums. When Djam first moved to the US, he originally settled in New York City but during a trip to southwest Wisconsin, he fell in love with the abundance of trees here and quickly moved.

Djam plays the drums he makes. He performs frequently and when he teaches drum making he also teaches drumming rhythms. For example, as an artist in residence at Shabazz High School in Madison, Djam worked with 20 students so each built their own djembe and learned how to play. Then they performed for their proud parents at graduation.

In the Apprenticeship Program, Djam has taught both adults – Nicolas Ansah, and teens – brother and sister Joseph and Tamaya Schreiber Poznik. The apprenticeship gave Nicholas a place to carve and gave Joseph and Tamaya a strong connection to their heritage. “It means a lot to me. I appreciate knowing where my ancestors came from and having the opportunity to be an apprentice.”

“You cannot play the drums if you don’t feel happy. The playing makes you happy.”
Djam Vivie